

## **“Harvesting Tips for Vegetable Gardeners”**

I feel sorry for anyone who hasn't eaten a vine ripe tomato or truly fresh sweet corn. Vegetable gardeners who were able to nurse their plantings through the drought are now being rewarded by the special taste of “home grown.” We are at the peak of the spring harvest season and it is important to pick and store properly for maximum eating quality.

The tomato is the most popular vegetable, and its taste and shelf life is closely tied to how it is picked and handled after harvest. To obtain the best flavor and color, harvest tomatoes after they are fully ripe. If picked in the mature green or pink stage they can be ripened indoors at about 70 degrees F.

Light increases the color of tomatoes to some degree, but light is not essential to complete the ripening process. Don't place them in direct sunlight to finish ripening because the added heat often lowers their quality. Fully ripened fruit may be placed in the refrigerator to prolong keeping, but never place unripened ones in the refrigerator.

Sweet corn is one of the most sensitive crops because the taste can be quickly affected by harvesting and storing procedures. For example, if sweet corn is picked and piled in the garden when the temperature is ninety degrees, half of the sugar will be converted to starch within one hour!

A friend of mine is a sweet corn junkie, and when I told him about the speed at which sweet corn converts sugars to starch he devised a plan. He now takes a tub partially filled with ice to the corn patch and cools down the ears as they are picked. This might sound extreme, but I have eaten some fine sweet corn as a result.

The prime picking time for sweet corn is called the “milk stage” and it only lasts for 4 or 5 days, so it is important to keep an eye on the planting and be ready. At this stage the silks have turned brown beyond the end of the husks and the ear has enlarged enough to fill the husks tightly to the tip. The kernels are about as large as they will become, but they are still soft, tender and filled with a milky juice.

It takes some experience to learn the optimum maturity for sweet corn harvest. Another way to estimate harvest time is to note the date of silk

emergence on the earliest plants in a row. Harvest time will be two to three weeks after silk emergence.

The sooner that sweet corn is prepared for serving, the better. It can be held in a refrigerator for 2 to 3 days with only a minor reduction in quality.

Early morning harvest of all kinds of vegetables is extremely important. At this time of day, plants have had all night to take up moisture and are in their freshest state. On the other hand, if harvested late in the day, they will have built up “field heat,” resulting in lowered quality.

**Question of the Week:** My yard is beginning to look like a desert due to the drought. I can’t seem to keep up with watering all of my plants. What can I do?

**Answer:** Different species of plants require different amounts of water to survive. There are some general precautions that can be taken to help prevent long term damage. Before making a plan, make sure to follow local and regional water regulations.

First, extend the number of days between water applications to the longest suitable interval. Irrigate lawns only after 30 percent starts to wilt and water established shrubs once or twice per week. Irrigate deeply at long intervals rather than giving frequent, shallow waterings.

Given a choice, early morning watering is best. Less moisture is lost to evaporation and wind at this time. Adjust sprinklers to make sure that they are on target, rather than spraying water on sidewalks and streets.

Mow the lawn less frequently and higher, using a sharp blade. Control weeds because they use water that would otherwise be available for desirable plants.

Don’t fertilize until the drought is over. Fertilizer promotes plant growth, increasing the need for water.

Exceptionally valuable plants can be watered individually by using a hose or a small “spot” watering sprinkler that is available at most garden supply stores.